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Development of a training program for sheltered workshops in the Netherlands

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SUMMARY

'Mentally retarded' employees of sheltered workshops have problems in generalizing or using skills in a flexible way. As soon as some working condition changes, individual production levels often decrease dramatically. In sheltered workshops this *lack of flexibility* is a real 'threat' to successful employment of the 'mentally retarded'.

Chapter 1 challenges the assumption that lack of flexibility is related to stable characteristics of the cognitive functioning of 'mentally retarded' persons, which cannot be changed by training. The aim of this project is to develop a training program for vocational training of 'mentally retarded' employees of sheltered workshops. The central research question is formulated as: *'Is it possible through training to increase the flexibility of 'mentally retarded' employees of sheltered workshops?'*

Chapter 2 describes practical and theoretical issues. It is emphasized that the training program to increase flexibility should aim at teaching employees to function independently and to be responsible for their own work. The lack of flexibility of 'mentally retarded' employees is related to an absence of and/or inefficient use of metacognition. Therefore, employees should not only learn specific skills to perform tasks, but should also learn general skills to regulate task performance. Three general skills are identified: planning, structuring and directing task performances.

Chapter 3 reports on the development of three instruments for the assessment of assembly task performances. To assess general skills an observation system and an interview are constructed. Perceptible behaviors before and while employees are performing assembly tasks, as well as statements of employees about these behaviors, are related to the concept of general skills. An evaluation list to judge final task outcomes is constructed from the perspective of supervisors of the production and training department.

Chapter 4 describes the construction of the training program. The traditional instructional method to teach 'mentally retarded' employees skills, the structure-and-prescribe (STRAP)-method, is described and evaluated as inadequate for the teaching of general skills. The reciprocal instruction method (RIM) is translated to sheltered workshop training practices as an alternative to STRAP. The main principle in RIM is that

employees 'experiment' with their tasks according to their own insights, before receiving instruction. The instruction is then geared towards supporting employees without taking over (responsibility for) their task performance. They are challenged to think about what they are doing and to think of alternatives in order to improve their performance. The final training program to increase flexibility of 'mentally retarded' employees is presented on the basis of content of the program, instructional procedure, planning and duration, and correspondence to daily working situations.

Chapter 5 reports on the effects of the training program on employees' task performance. First, the main research question is subdivided into four specific research questions:

- 1 Are there changes in general skills during participation in the training program?
- 2 If so, are these changes in general skills maintained after participation in the training program?
- 3 Are there changes in task outcomes during participation in the training program?
- 4 If so, are these changes in task outcomes maintained after participation?

Second, the training program is implemented in practice. The case study method is used to assess behavioral changes in individuals and to relate these changes to participation in the training program. This method is repeated across fifteen subjects in four training departments. Third, in each case study the four research questions are answered.

Chapter 6 concludes with a survey and a discussion. Results show that the program has a positive effect on general skills and task outcomes, both during participation as well as some time after training. As a consequence, employees can meet the flexibility criterion for productivity in sheltered workshops. Moreover, results of this project support current theories on cognitive functioning of 'mentally retarded' persons. These theories relate lack of flexibility of 'mentally retarded' with an absent or inefficient use of metacognition. Metacognition is interpreted as a variable aspect of cognitive functioning, that can be improved by training. Future 'mentally retarded' employees will stand a better chance in sheltered workshops if they are taught both to regulate and to think about what they are doing. The chapter ends with relating these conclusions to changing attitudes with regard to mental retardation in for example special education and care systems.

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